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A Loving Salute to the King of the Road

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A LOVING SALUTE TO

Out around Erick, the natives recognize Roger Miller, the famous songwriter and performer, as one of Western Oklahoma's most colorful characters. Back in 1965, his "King of the Road" sold over 2.5 million records. He won an unprecedented eleven Grammy awards and earned four gold records for albums grossing a million dollars or more.

Twenty years later, his versatile talent took him to the top, to Broadway, and made him a Tony Award winner in recognition of his outstanding original music and lyrics for "Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," his first score for theater. It was named the best Broadway musical of 1985. Rocco Landesman, producer, said: "I wanted to get America's greatest novelist. Mark Twain would have been proud." Later, Roger Miller remarked, "I was so dumb I didn't know enough at first to get excited about it."

Not bad for a two-mule cotton patch "six miles the other side of RESUME SPEED" and a boy who never used a telephone until he was seventeen. He was reared with no indoor plumbing and no electricity in the farmhouse.

Roger Dean Miller was born on January 2, 1936 in Fort Worth. His father died less than a year later, and his mother, in those Depression days, could not provide for her three sons. She sent them to each of the father's three brothers—in Arkansas, California, and Oklahoma. Roger was reared by E.D.

and Amelia Miller near Erick, in Beckham County. He attended a one-room school and joined the Future Farmers of America though he had no intentions of farming. From age six, Roger's ambition was to be like Sheb Wooley, a country singer who lived up the road a ways and was married to Roger's cousin. Wooley was famous for his "Purple People Eater" and other novelty songs and acted in RAWHIDE and Western films. Sheb taught young Roger some strings chords, and the boy picked 400 pounds of cotton to buy a second-hand guitar.

"I didn't see much use to waste my time with algebra, so as soon as I perfected my autograph in the eighth grade, I quit school to become a singer." He left home and bummed around. . . a kid who stole milk from front porches to survive. Drifting from town to town, he worked as a carhop, helper in a filling station, a dishwasher, herded and dehorned cattle, drove a tractor on a wheat ranch, rode Brahma bulls in rodeos. He was briefly a firefighter in Amarillo. "There were only two fires while I was there," he said. "The first was a chicken coop. I slept through the other one and they fired me." Evenings, he hung around honkytonks, sang for anyone who would listen, and begged to sit in with bands.

At seventeen, Miller joined the U.S. Army and drove a jeep in Korea until his musical ability got him into Special Services and a country music band where he met

a certain sergeant, Jethro, of the comedy team of Homer and Jethro. His new friend convinced him to head for Nashville at the end of his military service. "Otherwise, I would go back to Oklahoma and work in a gas station," he said.

In Nashville, no one took him seriously as a performer. He worked as a bellhop at the posh Andrew Jackson Hotel, a fiddle player with Minnie Pearl, a guitar player with George Jones, a drummer with Faron Young. He kept writing songs. "Invitation to the Blues" was recorded by Ray Price and by Patti Page, "Half a Mind" by Ernest Tubb, and "Billy Bayou" by Jim Reeves. He hung around Tootsie's Orchid Lounge with free spirits like Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson. People in the music business affectionately called him the Wild Child, but his break didn't come.

"I almost let failure go to my head," Miller declared. He decided to go to California and "maybe study acting." To finance the trip, he recorded an album for Smash, a subsidiary of Mercury on which was his tune "Dang Me," a song of self-disgust. It became a hit single within a week of release, selling more than a million copies. "There for a while, I thought I was Elvis," Roger said of his sudden notice among the guests.

He was on his way. . . appearances on the TONIGHT SHOW, Las Vegas bookings, which are the most lucrative in show business, an NBC television series, THE ROGER MILLER SHOW. His output

THE KING OF THE ROAD

By Ernestine Gravley

was phenomenal. He wrote songs on airplanes, in cars, in hotel rooms, at recording studios, using whatever paper was available—envelopes, napkins, gum wrappers. Many good songs vanished from Miller's memory because he lost track of his "spearmint manuscripts." But his "treasure box," a leather chest about three feet long and two feet deep, is filled with scraps of compositions that were *not* lost. Overnight, Roger Miller was making \$10,000 a performance "back in the poor days." He made his debut in Carnegie Hall in 1966, but the Big Apple reviews were for the most part unfavorable.

No matter. His irresistible personality attracted attention and people. William Price Fox of TV GUIDE said: "His coterie is like Sugar Ray's. . . a strange mix of beards, frauds, disc jockeys, and silent staring Texans and Okies just passing through."

"Everybody's my closest friend," Roger told VARIETY. "Man, I ain't got room to breathe."

His television show was scheduled opposite I LOVE LUCY and lasted only sixteen weeks. "They were trying to make a country Andy Williams out of me, writing my lines, putting words in my mouth that didn't fit. . . I couldn't think, couldn't sing, couldn't write."

He returned to the nightclub circuit, kept writing and slept little. Accustomed as they were to late hours, show people were astonished by Roger's ability to forego

sleep. William Whitworth reported in THE NEW YORKER Miller's penchant for marathon partying, entertaining, and welcoming all who cared to show up. Whitworth attended one of these events which lasted not for hours but for days. Roger came out of a bathroom of his suite in the Sahara at Las Vegas tugging at the waist of his slacks. "These ——— things are gaining weight," he grumbled. He wore gray pants, a white shirt open at the throat, and an electric blue jacket. They took in a show by Dobie Gray in the Congo Room where Roger congratulated the performer: "Wow, man, that was real average."

He slumped in his chair, overcome with 24 or more hours wide awake. "I'm having a 92 percent good time out of a possible 96," he said, sighing heavily. It was 4:30 A.M. "We may have to get out of here," Roger added. "I'm having too good of a time."

Back in his suite, twenty or so of his entourage and droppers-by were ready to call it a night, but Miller suggested, "We could go watch the free parking at the Flamingo." He fought sleep and drank Coca-Colas. The liquid portion of his diet is almost exclusively Coke, and he often consumed a case a day. When things slowed down from weariness, he suggested, "I think it's time we broke into a series of folk dances. As long as there's a vine, I'll swing."

About sunrise, Whitworth relates,

Miller said, "I know. Let's all go to L.A. Let's go to my house. Let's go see if I have any mail. Hey, Jerry," he told his road manager, "Call the Lear." He had two pilots available for any hour.

When someone asked, "You look tired, Rodge. When did you last go to bed?" He answered, "I don't know, but it was before that." In certain moods and while talk goes on around him, the champ says, "I don't know how to react to that. Ya'll go ahead and talk about it." At other times, Roger, the lonely seeker, the tender of heart (believe it!) will say, "Aw, let's don't talk about that. Why don't we just hum for a while?"

Roger Miller and his entourage flew in his Lear jet back and forth between Los Angeles and Las Vegas for three days, and Miller didn't miss a single performance. When asked how long Roger could stay awake, his drummer at the time said, "Well, I'm not sure. I've only been with Roger a year and a half. I don't know how long he was awake before that." Miller later revealed that his energy came from amphetamines during that period of his life, an addiction he subsequently overcame and crusaded against.

His Woodland Hills mansion in the Los Angeles area overflowed with people. Roger showed his guests walls covered with gold records, awards, plaques, the Popeye Spinach Award for building a Little League Park in Muleshoe, Texas, an invitation to the White House,

citations from **BILLBOARD** magazine, a medal from the governor of Oklahoma, the first draft of "King of the Road" scrawled on a West Coast airlines credit card application, a souvenir of Roger Miller Day in Tulsa.

Outside was his fleet of luxury automobiles: several Mercedes-Benz models, Jaguars, Lincoln Town Cars, Cadillacs, and four motorcycles. Asked if the novelty of being rich had faded any for him, Roger said, "I like my cars. My uncle never had a car. . . just an old pickup and it was *his*. Yeah, I wanted a red Model A real bad. One thing, though, I don't look at the right side of a menu anymore. But I like peanut butter and jelly sandwiches better."

Eventually, months or years later, Roger Miller said one day: "Whoa! This life won't work. I'm tired of falling down. I gotta conduct my business. You either mature or you die." He went before an Oklahoma state legislature to support a ban on over-the-counter sale of amphetamines because "it could keep somebody from getting into the same snake pit I got into." With two failed marriages and five children—Dean, Shannon, Alan, Rhonda, and Shari—he had at last come to his senses.

He reached back to his roots once more, mined his Oklahoma boyhood for a stunning comeback, this time as composer of **BIG RIVER**, which walked away with seven Tony awards, including Best Musical and Best Score. Reviews were glowing with praise. **NEW LEADER** said that Roger Miller's music and Director McAnuff's skill found the right tone to make the production perfect. "I felt like I was a real writer at last," he told David Hutchings. "It's like I had the paints and brushes, but until now I didn't have the canvas."

One of Roger's songs in the musical was "Arkansas" for his natural mother, who lives in that state. He invited her to New York to hear it.

On Valentine's Day, 1978, he married singer Mary Arnold after

Kenny Rogers introduced them. "Mary's my third wife," Roger said. "But I've really been married only this one time. I'm a different person than I was."

They settled in New Mexico, where they live on twenty acres six miles north of Santa Fe with his son Dean, several horses, cats, and dogs. "I don't like to live on the road; I've done that," Roger told Jack Hurst of the **CHICAGO TRIBUNE**. "Some people get to going so hard in the fast lane they can't pull off even if they get a flat."

"There's no pretension with Roger," Mary says. "I travel with him his twenty weeks of club dates; then we come home to Santa Fe and Rodge says, 'Let's go get a cheeseburger with green chiles.' He's like that."

Roger Miller, the Okie, is five feet ten inches tall, weighs about 170, has a long jaw and small, deep-set eyes. But then everybody knows his face. They just may not know the *man* as well. In Nashville, he is rated with Jimmie Rodgers and Hank Williams, the two most revered figures in country songwriting. The appealing elements in his lyrics include love of wordplay (last word in *lonesome* is *me*; squares make the world go 'round). In his country-boy baritone, he sings of love and neon and honkytonks and you've-been-cheatin'-on-me-darlin', but with a difference. He is a joy to hear. . . he cannot tolerate the whiny earnestness of the hard stuff. He can sense at once if the audience is with him, that he is wanted and loved.

Roger is scrupulously honest. "I can't read a note of music," he admitted. "I don't know a bar from a stripe. I just learned the positions on the guitar. After I record a song, the publisher has someone to write it out. I don't wanna learn much about music. Afraid it might affect my free fall."

In the country music field, he is successful to a degree that might fairly well be described as spectacular. In Broadway theater, he just stands by in wonder. "I'm still enjoying the thrill of **BIG RIVER**,"

he says. "I'll always be able to stand around and say I wrote a musical for Broadway and it's playing in Oklahoma City, Wichita Falls, and Cleveland tonight. That's a great reward."

LIFE magazine called Roger Dean Miller a "cracker barrel philosopher and humorist" who "can rarely put two sentences together without a pun or a joke." As for Roger, he regrets not a moment of his Oklahoma days at home. "It was hard at the time," he reflects, "but I wouldn't be anything of what I am if it wasn't for that. Some people feel the rain and some just get wet."

Today, he relaxes a great deal along the Rio Grande ("It's where I learned to sit back and be quiet") and reflects on his Texas-Oklahoma background of hitchhiking, country towns, dusty roads, and hopeless jobs: "I'm a man of means by no means. . . King of the Road." ●

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ERNESTINE GRAVLEY of Shawnee, a prize-winning poet and prose writer, has been a loyal WESTVIEW supporter and writer all the days of our lives.